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ABSTRACT

As part of its contract to develop a framework for continuous school improvement in its four-state region (Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia), Appalachia Educational Laboratory staff designed the Quest project. Based upon principles of inquiry, collaboration, and action research, Quest supports and investigates ongoing school improvement efforts through conferences, visits to participating schools, communication via listserv and mailings, and the creation of a Quest network of schools. The second network conference was held November 2-4, 1997, in Nashville, Tennessee. Teams of teachers, parents, and administrators from each of 11 elementary schools attended, for a total of 48 participants. The conference featured storytelling as a way to think about continuous school improvement. Evaluation data were generated by evaluator participant observation, unstructured interviews, written feedback, quantitative evaluation, and a follow-up survey. Data indicate that the conference's six goals--connect with colleagues, create a learning community, connect with concepts related to continuous school improvement, create personal and shared meaning, commit to continue learning with this community, and commit to continue the Quest back home--were met well, especially connecting with colleagues and committing to continue Quest back home. Follow-up data indicate the conference contributed to participants' fledgling school improvement endeavors, although the listserv did not. At least two participating schools began to support each other. Recommendations are made for improving future conferences. Three appendices present feedback and follow-up forms and the evaluation standards checklist. (Author/TD)

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Evaluation of QUEST Elementary School Network Inquiry into Improvement Conference, November 1997

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Evaluation of QUEST Elementary School Network Inquiry into Improvement Conference, November 1997

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ii

INTRODUCTION 1

Conference Activities 1

METHODOLOGY 5

FINDINGS 7

Comparative 7

Goals 7

Goal One: Connect with Colleagues 7
Goal Two: Create a Learning Community 9
Goal Three: Connect with Concepts Related to Continuous School Improvement 9
Goal Four: Create Personal and Shared Meaning 10
Goal Five: Commit to Continue Learning with This Community 11
Goal Six: Commit to Continue the QUEST Back Home 11

Follow-Up 11

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 13

Conclusions 13

Recommendations 14

REFERENCES 16

APPENDICES 17

A: Feedback Forms
B: Follow-Up Form
C: Completed Evaluation *Standards* Checklist

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of its contract to develop a framework for continuous school improvement in its four-state Region, Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) staff designed the QUEST project. Based upon principles of inquiry, collaboration, and action research, QUEST proposes to support and investigate ongoing school improvement efforts through bi-annual conferences, visits to participating schools, communication via listserv and mailings, and the creation of a QUEST network of schools. The first network conference was held October 5 -7, 1997 for selected high schools within AEL's Region; a second was held for selected Region elementary schools November 2 - 4, 1997, in Nashville, Tennessee. This evaluation report assesses the elementary conference.

Teams from 11 schools attended the elementary conference. Of the 11, one school was a private parochial K-8 school; the remainder were public schools. Teams, ranging in size from three to seven, consisted of teachers, counselors, and parents, as well as school administrators. A total of 48 people attended.

The conference was evaluated in terms of whether and to what extent the conference goals were met. To this end, a variety of data were gathered: fieldnotes were taken during evaluator participant observation of all conference activities; participants completed two written feedback forms, one quantitative conference evaluation form, and one written follow up form distributed at the following elementary conference in February, 1998; and unstructured interviews were conducted throughout the conference. The follow up questionnaire also enabled assessment of the impact QUEST had upon participating schools.

Analysis of the feedback data revealed that participants felt that all of the conference goals had been met well, especially the goals concerning connecting with colleagues and committing to continue QUEST back in their schools. The goal concerning the creation of personal and shared meaning was rated least well, although the mean rating nevertheless indicated that participants felt it had been achieved well above average. Participant observation corroborated participants' positive assessments of the conference: attendees generally engaged actively in all activities, appeared to have thoughtful exchanges with each other, and began to discuss improvement strategies for their schools. Follow up data indicated that participants found the conference made a contribution to their fledgling school improvement endeavors, although the QUEST listserv did not. In terms of the development of the QUEST network, at least two participating schools began to use each other for support.

Based upon these data, the evaluator concluded that the first QUEST conference for elementary schools had made a productive beginning. Recommendations included ongoing efforts to improve communication within the network and strategies to clarify and enhance the making of personal and shared meaning during conferences. In addition, the evaluator recommended that QUEST staff consider the ways they might offer support and follow up as schools begin to implement school improvement projects.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1996, QUEST staff at the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) began their work with teams from school communities in three West Virginia county school districts. The staff's aim was to invigorate efforts for continuous school improvement, using a variety of techniques for gathering input from all those with a stake in their local schools. This first "learning community," known as Leadership to Unify School Improvement Efforts (LUSIE), was comprised of school teams including students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. Ultimately, this group wrote school visions and improvement plans and co-authored *Creating Energy for School Improvement* (AEL 1997), a supplemental guide for those poised to write their own school improvement plans.

QUEST staff also were committed to creating learning communities devoted to exploring continuous school improvement across the AEL Region. Hence, staff held a pilot Inquiry into Improvement conference in April 1997 in Johnson City, Tennessee, for selected Region high schools. In October 1997 in Roanoke, Virginia, another conference was held for selected high schools in AEL's Region, this time with an explicit emphasis on forming and nurturing a network of high schools. In November 1997 at the Airport Days Inn in Nashville, Tennessee, the first conference for elementary schools was held, with a clear focus on building a network for selected Region elementary schools. This report summarizes the evaluation of the QUEST elementary school conference.

The primary audience for this report is QUEST staff. It is intended to provide information to staff as they make decisions about future rallies and the development of the network. In addition, this report will be a part of an ongoing series of reports about QUEST events. This series will document the evolution of the QUEST network and the process whereby staff strive to enable continuous school improvement. Hence, this report may also be useful to those concerned with school improvement endeavors.

The purpose of this report is to assess whether and to what extent conference goals were met. In addition, this report discusses the ways in which the November 1997 conference compared to the earlier conference for selected Region high schools, as part of the ongoing documentation of network development. And the report finally attends to participants' assessments of the impact the conference had upon their schools, their QUEST teams, and their individual perceptions.

Conference Activities

Convened in Nashville, Tennessee, from November 2-4, the third Inquiry into Improvement conference sought to bring together for the first time teams from various elementary schools concerned with continuous improvement. Teams from 11 schools attended, two of whom were slated to tell their stories to the entire group (storytelling being a feature of this conference). Of the 11, one school was a private Catholic K-8 school; the remainder were public schools. Teams consisted of teachers, counselors, and parents, as well as school administrators. A total of 48 people attended. In addition, five QUEST staff and the AEL resident director for Tennessee observed or participated

in the conference activities. And, a senior research associate with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas, attended as well in order to facilitate one of the storytelling teams with whom she had been studying the creation and support of professional learning communities.

The conference began with a welcome from the facilitators to the participants, after which participants engaged in several activities meant to foster connection with colleagues from across the Region as they began their "journey" toward continuous improvement. The inquiry groups, made up of participants from different schools, states, and role groups, sat at round tables. On each table were purple name placards; colorful wooden windcatchers; containers of markers, pens, tape, and other supplies; and a three-ring QUEST binder for each participant. Each binder included an explication of the QUEST framework, essays on school improvement, activity guidelines, and space for participants to add additional materials. Staff had placed vivid posters and encouraging, thought-provoking quotes around the perimeter of the room, and had several tables filled with books and extra supplies.

Following introductory activities, the facilitators discussed storytelling as a means to think about continuous school improvement and as a "way of learning together in a community." Participants noted various ways in which stories could enhance inquiry, offering that a story might "parallel our own life," "engage our emotions," have "a bigger truth," or let "us see things from a different point of view." After this discussion, participants were asked to think of a story from their own lives about a significant educational experience and then form triads with whom they would share such stories.

The next activity required attendees to consider nine traits: open, curious, persistent, caring, creative, proactive, courageous, reflective, and collaborative. Staff assigned one trait to each of the inquiry groups, who were then asked to discuss their trait in terms of the following questions: "What encourages/discourages people to assume this trait? What is the power of this trait in a school? What is the value of this trait for students?" After approximately 15 minutes of discussion, inquiry groups gave brief reports to the whole group about their conversations. The evening ended with several minutes devoted to personal reflection in journals.

The second day of the conference began with school teams reflecting on what they had learned the previous evening and what they hoped to derive from the remainder of the conference. After some discussion, teams shared some of their conclusions with the whole group. One group, for example, noted that "It's difficult not to know exactly where you're going. We're trying to reflect on what we've done and we're not really sure." Another group said, "This will help us focus on where it is we're going." Other teams reported that they felt encouraged and invigorated to be discussing important education issues with colleagues from other locales.

The QUEST conference facilitators then asked participants to engage in a whole group activity called Mindmap, in which a visual representation of a central theme--in this case, what attendees thought they had learned from the previous day's activities-- is created. The central theme

is written in the middle of a large piece of butcher paper; spokes from the central theme represent the relationship of various ideas to the theme and to each other. During this activity, attendees shared what they thought they had learned thus far, including, for instance, "solving a problem starts within," "everyone can learn if given a chance," and "we have to focus, stay on our path."

The next activity asked participants to use a variety of questions to explore the implications of stories shared the previous day. As one group said after the activity, the questioning prompted them to "[go] into more the underlying causes of this situation."

For the next several hours, attendees listened to teams from two schools tell their stories of continuous improvement. Recruited for their histories of sustaining improvement efforts, these two schools were asked to tell their stories, describing their trajectories, goals, impediments to improvement, problems, and challenges, as well as their triumphs. This focus on storytelling was a feature of the conference, emphasizing the ways in which stories are "mirrors" into our own circumstances as well as "windows" into others' experiences. As such, stories are powerful ways to inquire together in community about continuous improvement.

After each story, participants were provided time to ask the storytelling schools questions. Most attendees asked questions about *how* each school had sustained efforts to improve continuously. Queries included, "How do you keep parents involved?" and "How did you keep on track with so many principals?"

Now in triads, participants were asked to discuss what they had learned from the school stories. After this activity, the facilitators requested attendees to ask further questions of the storytelling teams. The focus shifted from questions about how the schools had accomplished improvement to *what* constituted school improvement. For instance, one group asked,"What *is* parent involvement?"

The concluding activity was a Mindmap of the common themes participants extrapolated from the two school stories of improvement. These themes included, "commitment to vision," "affirmation of students, staff and parents," "communication," "staff development--we are all learners and teachers," "commitment of time," "time to reflect," "risk-takers," "administrative support--teacher ownership," "early intervention," and "proactive -- they made things happen in their school."

The final day of the conference began with an activity in which participants were asked to vote for the Mindmap themes they believed to be most important. Votes were cast by placing post-it dots next to themes written on the Mindmap. After all the votes were placed, a picture emerged of what conference attendees found to be most important for improvement efforts. "Communication" and "teacher ownership" received many votes, but participants had also spread their dots fairly evenly across the other themes, suggesting that they did not as a group think that specific themes were most significant to school improvement. Instead, they appeared to believe that improvement required a whole spectrum of actions, beliefs, commitments, and supports.

The facilitators next discussed the "wheel of continuous improvement," which depicted the components QUEST staff theorized were integral to a continuously improving school. "This," as one staff member put it, "is our big picture." Then staff explained that the remainder of the conference would focus on efforts to improve the school context, which would involve three segments of the "wheel of continuous improvement"--strengthening the learning culture, broadening the learning community, and sharing leadership.

Participants then watched a clip from the movie "Apollo 13," from which they were to extrapolate which learning culture traits contributed to the astronauts' success. Attendees described the following traits: "cooperation," "knowledge," "confidence in each others' expertise," "resourcefulness," "ability to analyze what they had," "sense of urgency," "able to work under pressure," "everyone was vital," "[what everyone did] was greater than what one person could produce," "weren't afraid to fail," "persistence," "creative," "anticipated problems," "courageous," and "dedicated to their mission." One participant noted "When technology failed, their brains worked."

Next attendees wrote in their journals about an experience they had in a community, after which the facilitators led an activity to reenergize participants and create pairs for the next discussion. This discussion focused on how shared leadership might be enacted in classrooms.

Attendees then read from their QUEST notebooks the sections on learning culture, community, and shared leadership in preparation for inquiry group discussion. After the discussion, a staff member from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas, reported on her research with professional learning communities.

Facilitators asked school teams to reconvene and discuss a "Vision of a QUEST School" staff had prepared. School teams discussed how relevant the vision was to their schools and what they might change to improve its relevance. The final activities prepared school teams to begin planning for improvement efforts. Trek Mindscape, for example, provided a visual representation of a path, obstacles, and goals, with blank spaces provided for participants to describe their school's path, goals, and obstacles. Staff provided time for attendees to discuss their action plans in school teams and then report their plans to the whole group. The plans included creating a book club for staff, instituting a "teacher of the week" award, improving intervention for at-risk students, developing a more open school climate, conducting a school "culture audit," beginning a study group, conducting surveys of school communities, and eradicating a faculty lounge. The last activity requested participants to commit to action back in their schools.

METHODOLOGY

The methods used for this evaluation component of the QUEST project were primarily qualitative. During the conference, the evaluator engaged in participant observation (Becker & Geer 1957; Emerson 1983; Glazer 1972; Miles & Huberman 1994), a method highly suited "for studying processes, relationships among people and events, the organization of people and events, continuities over time, and patterns" (Jorgensen 1989, p. 12). Furthermore, consistent with the QUEST paradigm, participant observation involves "a flexible, open-ended, opportunistic process and logic of inquiry through which what is studied constantly is subject to redefinition based on field experience and observation" (Jorgensen 1989, p. 23). This method "is a commitment to adopt the perspective of those studied by sharing in their...experiences" (Denzin 1989, p. 156), thereby enabling researchers to evaluate how an event or process appears and feels to participants.

During the conference, the evaluator participated in an inquiry group, engaging in group activities and discussions. However, in order to expedite more complete observations and limit potential impact on the group proceedings, the evaluator played a restrained participative role. This is what Denzin (1989) calls "participant as observer" in which the participant "makes her presence as an investigator known and attempts to form a series of relationships with the subjects such that they serve as both respondents and informants" (p. 163).

Unstructured interviews were also conducted during the course of each rally. As opportunities arose for relatively private conversation, participants were asked to discuss their assessments of the rally generally and of the achievement of rally goals specifically. Interview responses were later categorized and analyzed by theme.

In addition, four other observers not directly associated with any of the 11 elementary schools were able to participate. Each was assigned by the facilitators to an inquiry group, with whom they spent almost the entire conference, except for school team activities. These observers provided notes and feedback to the evaluator about their experiences and perceptions of the inquiry group activities in particular and the conference in general.

In order to corroborate the theses generated by participant observation, the evaluator also analyzed data from three feedback forms designed by QUEST staff soliciting participant assessment of the process (see Appendix A). Two forms solicited written responses, while the third asked respondents to rate, using a Likert-type scale, how successfully they felt conference goals had been achieved. The scale was constructed such that a rating of "5" indicated that the goal under consideration had been met "extremely well," while a rating of "1" corresponded with an assessment that the goal was "not well accomplished."

Finally, participants were asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire just prior to the beginning of a second elementary conference held in February 1998 (see Appendix B). The questionnaire queried participants about what they had learned at the previous conference, what their

schools or QUEST teams had done as a result of their participation in QUEST, and the impact of the QUEST listserv. Nine of the eleven schools that participated in the November 1997 conference returned for the February 1998 conference; of the original 48 participants, 27 (56%) returned. Of these 27, 21 (78%) responded to the follow-up questionnaire.

Using several data sources to corroborate findings is what Brewer and Hunter (1989) call "multimethod research" or "triangulation." This approach posits that the strengths of each method will make up for the weaknesses in the others, ultimately providing a more complete account of that being studied. Hence, the evaluator used participant observation, unstructured interviews conducted in between conference activities, and quantitative and qualitative feedback forms to generate a clearer account of the conference.

FINDINGS

Comparative Findings

First, and most obviously, this conference differed from previous QUEST conferences in that participants were elementary level teachers, administrators, and parents. Ultimately, this difference influenced the flavor of the experience, as well as the content of participants' concerns. For example, whereas high school teachers and principals often discussed discipline issues, the elementary school staff were more likely to discuss pedagogy. In addition, there appeared to be greater emphasis upon the caring and nurturing involved in teaching. Unlike the previous two conferences, all the participants were women. Being too young to participate meaningfully in the conference, no students attended the elementary event. Finally, the elementary participants seemed more relaxed than the high school participants; for instance, there were few stories of exasperated conf-rontations with misbehaving children.

Similarly to the pilot QUEST high school conference in Johnson City, Tennessee, this inquiry experience included storytelling as a means of exploring continuous improvement. However, the facilitators structured activities following the telling of stories such that participants were better able to use the stories as catalysts for further and deeper inquiry. As one attendee observed, "We thought it was just a simple story -- but we kept coming up with questions to deepen it."

Goals

In this section, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, the degree to which participants felt conference goals had been achieved will be discussed. Approximately 70% (N=33) of the participants returned their quantitative evaluation of the conference, which consisted of a Likert-type response option, ranging from "5" indicating the goal assessed was met "extremely well" to "1" meaning the goal was "not well accomplished." Fifty-eight percent (N=28) returned written assessments.

Goal One: Connect with Colleagues

According to participant response, the goal of connecting with colleagues was the second most successfully achieved goal. With a mean of 4.74, participants overwhelmingly felt that they had important interactions with colleagues from across the Region. This item also had the second lowest standard deviation, .50, indicating that participants' reactions were highly congruent (see Table 1). These data suggest that the connection participants achieved with each other was extremely successful.

Conference attendees also corroborated their quantitative responses with positive written evaluations of their experiences connecting with colleagues. Some of their comments include: "[I] enjoyed sharing experiences with others and learning their stories," "We discussed many commonalities...stimulating and invigorating," and "I was very fortunate to have wonderful people at my table." Another wrote that she felt renewed by "communications with others who believe as fiercely as I do in our profession."

Some participants thought the heterogenous inquiry groups facilitated connection with a variety of colleagues. For instance, one attendee wrote, "I was reluctant but so glad we did it. It broadened my knowledge and I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know my 'new friends'. I look forward to seeing them in February." Other participants offered, "The flexible grouping opportunities provided me with opinions of people from diverse backgrounds and experiences," and " [I] made new friends and discussed several issues that we could not have done in large groups."

Others were slightly more critical however, noting, for example, that inquiry groups were "more focused but [had a] smaller pool of ideas." Another said, "Usually not my cup of tea with strangers, but it was better than I expected," while still another suggested that the inquiry groups were "good--but perhaps [involved] just a little too much repetitive 'brainstorming'."

Attendees also found the school team meetings useful, though five noted that they wished more time had been allotted to these activities. But, as one participant put it, the school team meetings were a "good way for us to 'connect' without our 'normal' jobs interfering."

Table 1

Participant Rating of the Achievement of Conference Goals

	Mean	SD*	N
Goal One: Connect with Colleagues	4.74	.50	33
Goal Two: Create a Learning Community	4.57	.55	33
Goal Three: Connect with Concepts Related to School Improvement	4.58	.64	33
Goal Four: Create Personal and Shared Meaning	4.39	.75	33
Goal Five: Commit to Continue Learning with this Community	4.70	.52	33
Goal Six: Commit to Continue The QUEST Back Home	4.76	.49	33

*SD = Standard Deviation

Goal Two: Create a Learning Community

With a mean of 4.57 and a standard deviation of .55 on the rating of learning community creation, participants appeared to feel that the goal of creating a learning community had been met well above average (see Table 1). Likewise, some of the conference attendees wrote of their sense of learning together with other attendees. For example, one participant discussed her connection with "individuals with whom I plan to be in contact with to share ideas." Another wrote of hoping to visit several of the schools represented at the conference. More concretely, one participant wrote of connecting with one of the storytelling teams, noting that her school might "set up a sister school relationship" with that school.

However, as community is an ongoing, continually recreated phenomenon, the achievement of this second goal will need to be assessed over time. Nonetheless, participants expressed their sense of having learned and reflected together. In response to the prompt "I was personally renewed by...," attendees wrote comments such as "hearing other individuals talk about what is working for them and going well in their schools and classrooms," "enthusiasm to involve the whole school staff and parent community to improve the school," and "new ideas to use when I get back."

Goal Three: Connect with Concepts Related to Continuous School Improvement

The mean rating for the achievement of this goal was 4.58, with a standard deviation of .64 (see Table 1). This indicates that participants thought the goal of connecting with concepts related to continuous improvement had been met very well.

During the conference, participants discussed a variety of continuous improvement concepts. Of storytelling as a way of facilitating improvement and connection between colleagues, one attendee said, "You become a little vulnerable, and I think people know that." Another replied, "You realize you're not alone." Still another offered, in reference to an earlier discussion of nine traits associated with people concerned to continually improve, "But caring comes first--before all other traits." One of the facilitators then asked, "I wonder if this means in order to continually improve we need first to improve our caring and concern?" A participant replied, "Yeah. Sometimes we don't realize the impact we have." In response, another attendee said, "The big thing to learn is that it's a journey. Sometimes we feel all-knowing." Returning to the notion of storytelling and its efficacy, one participant added, "But storytelling captures you." In response, "I think that's what was happening yesterday--because it was personal." "You become them. You put yourself in their place," noted another.

Participants also asked some probing questions. For instance, after the two storytelling schools had shared their narratives, the facilitators structured a period of time for questioning. As one storytelling school team discussed ways of nurturing parent involvement, a participant asked, "But what *is* parent involvement?" This question prompted an exchange about the various kinds of parent involvement, from volunteering in the school to "just helping kids with homework." One teacher

related a story about a parent who did not come into the school all year, yet called the teacher regularly to discuss her child. The group agreed that this was indeed parent involvement, although it did not conform to the popular conception of involvement as physical presence in the school.

Written evaluations of their inquiry experiences also verify that participants understood and thought about ideas associated with continuous school improvement. Two attendees wrote that they connected with the notion of shared leadership. Other areas of connection included "the need for reflection in assessing improvement" and "the idea of expansion of school family to include our parents." One participant wrote that she was personally renewed by "the conceptual frameworks for building a community of learners." In terms of the conceptual framework, another person noted that "we found that many/all of our discussions and discoveries connected back to these six constructs." And one participant told her inquiry group that the discussions helped her focus on the work of improving rather than on "firing with out aim, hoping you'll hit something."

Goal Four: Create Personal and Shared Meaning

Of all the goals, the creation of personal and shared meaning received the lowest rating for the degree to which it had been achieved (see Table 1). Still, with a mean of 4.39, participants felt that the goal had been met well above average. The standard deviation of .75 indicates that there was some disparity between participants' perceptions of how well this goal had been met, at least as compared to the standard deviations of the other questionnaire items.

Evaluations of the experience describe some of the personal meanings created. Several attendees found storytelling to be especially significant, writing "the storytelling made this all real and was the most powerful segment from an emotional standpoint," and storytelling "made the school personal and their presentations meaningful."

In terms of shared meaning, participants had less to say, although some of their written comments suggest that they deeply appreciated each other's contributions. And during the conference, one attendee said that it was "encouraging to be in a place where we've all taken the time out to journey...There's a spirit in this room of caring. We're here and ready."

Participants did reiterate several themes, suggesting shared meanings. These included viewing continuous improvement as a journey and expecting the unexpected along that journey. Attendees also expressed a shared sense of enthusiasm for the work ahead. After one school team reported to the large group their plans for the coming months, a team member said, "We're really excited, renewed, rejuvenated. We keep pinching ourselves!" During interviews and group discussions, participants often noted the realization that, as one person put it, "you're not alone."

Goal Five: Commit to Continue Learning with This Community

Participants felt strongly that the goal of committing to continue learning with the community created at the conference had been very well met (see Table 1). This goal received a mean rating of 4.70, with a standard deviation of .52.

Attendees wrote of their sense of commitment to continue learning with those they met in Nashville. For example, they noted their commitment to "being a part of the core QUEST team and following through with all our plans" and "continuing our 'Quest' or journey to learn, inspire, challenge, encourage, become productive." Participants also mentioned often the next meeting planned for February, suggesting that they felt it would be an integral part of an ongoing relationship with each other.

Goal Six: Commit to Continue the QUEST Back Home

This last goal received the highest mean rating from participants, 4.76, as well as the lowest standard deviation, .49 (see Table 1). Conference attendees, then, appear to be highly motivated to continue their search for ways of improving their schools in an ongoing fashion.

In response to the prompt "I am committed to..." on the evaluation forms, all but three of the participants who returned written assessments noted some way in which they felt committed to improving their schools. For instance, one participant wrote that she hoped to "work with our group in whatever way I can in order to continue our school's quest for a continuing learning environment." Others wrote of their commitment to begin "the change with me," "continuing our path to excellence," "improving myself professionally and inviting my colleagues to do the same," "change my school--by changing the stale opinions of some of the faculty," "renewing the spirit and gift of our school," and "work towards a school improvement plan that will meet the needs of our students and community."

Follow-Up

Renamed "rallies" by staff, conferences were held the following year for schools participating in the QUEST network. At the rally convened on February 22-24, 1998, for elementary schools, participants who had attended the previous rally were asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire. Twenty-seven of the original 48 participants returned to the second rally; of these 27, 21 (78%) responded to the follow-up form.

Returning attendees were asked to describe what, if anything, they had learned from the first conference. Three respondents wrote about gaining new ideas for school improvement. One wrote, "I learned several wonderful ideas for school improvement particularly from the presenting [storytelling] schools." Four respondents mentioned learning of constraints, challenges, and goals

that other schools faced that were similar to those they faced in their own schools. Four participants described learning how vital community and parent involvement were to the success of school improvement efforts. As one respondent put it, "School reform takes time. When change occurs, expect controversy unless all stakeholders have already bought into the change process." Five respondents wrote of having been encouraged or energized for school improvement by the conference. Other comments were more idiosyncratic. For instance, one attendee wrote, "I learned that many schools (teachers, adm[inistrators], parents) overcame incredible odds to solve problems and meet needs. Also, that educators are generally consummate professionals who are creative and dedicated to their craft." Such a comment highlights the insularity that many educators feel, as well as the value they discover in connecting with colleagues from other locales. Other participants noted specific learnings such as, "evaluation of programs are a must for continued growth" and "need to look within before change begins."

When asked what, if anything, they had done in their schools as a result of participating in QUEST, respondents described a variety of new initiatives. One school invited another QUEST school to send a team to discuss school improvement during a staff development day and then instituted "morning meetings" for the school community. One school began a study group, focusing on brain-based learning. Other participants wrote of having conducted needs assessments and evaluations of current school programs in order to, as one respondent phrased it, "work harder at fewer." Still other participants described efforts at their schools to build morale. Several attendees mentioned having conducted surveys of their school communities, both the Professional Learning Community survey designed by Shirley Hord and instruments created by the school faculty.

Only six returning participants claimed to have been a part of the QUEST electronic listserv. Of the six, five reported having been affected positively by participating. One respondent wrote, "I like receiving the information....It helps keep me going." Another offered, "I've enjoyed reading the bits and pieces of research reading and the thoughts of others on the topic." The sixth participant wrote, merely, that she had "received mail from [a facilitator] and AEL."

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Participants in the conference reported that they enjoyed meeting colleagues from across the Region. While most valued being involved in various group configurations, others reported drawbacks associated with working in small groups comprised of new acquaintances. Overall, however, attendees liked the experience of sharing ideas and stories with other educators and parents.

Many attendees felt that they had shared a learning experience with each other by engaging in a variety of activities that fostered discussion and inquiry. A few participants planned to continue learning together beyond the conference.

Participants discussed the ways in which they had contemplated various concepts associated with continuous school improvement. The framework of continuous improvement was useful to some participants, while inquiry and storytelling activities helped others think about how to approach and plan improvement efforts.

Likewise, storytelling helped attendees make meaning of their own experiences, by "parallel[ing] our own life," as well as "let[ting] us see things from a different point of view," as two participants phrased it. In terms of creating shared meaning, participants reported finding several themes especially salient, including continuous improvement as a journey rather than a delimited event and the inevitability of confronting obstacles along the way.

The QUEST network, according to attendees' reports, appeared to be a nascent learning community. Attendees reported feeling committed to continue meeting with other network teams as they sought ways to support improvement. Several participants made plans to stay in communication with each other aside from QUEST events.

According to participants, the goal of committing to continue the QUEST back in their school communities was the goal best achieved. Attendees reported being highly devoted to continue school improvement ventures in their respective schools. They also expressed excitement and enthusiasm for the work ahead of them.

Of those participants who also attended the following QUEST rally in February 1998, many reported having learned much from the earlier conference. Some mentioned being made aware of tools for enabling school improvement; others noted that the conference had energized them. Still others reported learning that many other schools faced similar problems and constraints.

Regarding the impact the QUEST conference had in their schools or within their QUEST teams, returning attendees described a variety of what might be considered school improvement initiatives.

These included establishing regular Monday morning meetings for the entire school, study groups, and needs assessments.

The QUEST listserv did not appear to be utilized by many of the network members. Only a few reported being involved with the listserv. Their comments indicated that they generally used it as a resource for information rather than as a means of communicating with other QUEST teams.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based upon data generated from participant observation of the conference, unstructured interviews with participants, and feedback attendees provided via evaluation forms.

The first recommendation, one which QUEST staff address continually, is that further opportunities for network members to meet and communicate be provided. Such opportunities might include conferences scheduled well in advance, a variety of network meetings different from rallies in design and purpose, and occasions for network members from both elementary and high schools to gather. The newly created QUEST Scholars program, which offers approximately 12 network members a small stipend for research with QUEST staff, and Summer Symposia, which are summer trainings on methods that might assist school improvement, are attempts to offer a greater diversity of network activity.

Second, efforts might be made to increase the number of participants connected to the QUEST listserv. Relatedly, network members who do have access to the listserv could be encouraged to use it as a means of communication. This might be achieved by establishing a "buddy system," such that each network member on-line has a virtual pen pal relationship with another member. Or, QUEST staff might assign "homework" that required network members to communicate via the listserv. Those without Internet access could complete their assignments on paper, and staff might then compile participants' work for sharing with the rest of the network.

Third, staff might want to be attuned to ways in which they can further support the new school improvement efforts schools have initiated since the first conference. For instance, once a needs assessment has been conducted in a school, staff could suggest tools for planning next steps to help ensure that the needs assessment is utilized.

A fourth recommendation is that QUEST staff continue to offer events and opportunities for communication in order to establish a sense of ongoing community. As the network develops, attempts ought to be made to continue communicating with members who are not able to attend all QUEST gatherings. Similarly, protocol might be developed to familiarize new members with the project's mission, the conceptual framework of continuous improvement, the processes and products of QUEST, and a time line depicting project activities. These activities may help initiate those new to QUEST and include absent veteran members.

A fifth recommendation is that QUEST staff consider the ways in which they might facilitate participants' meaning-making activities, as this goal received the lowest mean rating from QUEST members. For instance, staff might ask participants to write journal entries explicitly concerning what personal meaning they had made of the conference activities. In terms of shared meaning, participants might be asked to summarize their group experiences, emphasizing as they did so what meanings they had collectively formulated. Or perhaps participants could engage in discussion about what the goal of creating meaning *means*, in terms of both what constitutes the creation of meaning and what significance the creation of meaning has for school improvement efforts.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:

Feedback Forms

Inquiry Into Improvement
Feedback Form

The conference planners would appreciate your comments based upon the first day's experience.

Learnings, insights, ah-ha's from the day...

Things that worked especially well for me...

Ways in which I contributed...

Things that would have allowed me to contribute more...

Things I want to explore further...

Things to trash...

Other comments:

Inquiry Into Improvment

Please give us your feedback about the conference. In the top four boxes, we are asking for your reaction to four different experiences offered at the conference. How did the following "work" for you:

Activities Adapted from Future Search: Our History, Mindmap Trends, Prouds, and Visions?	Framework for Continuous Improvement: Learning about the Six Constructs?
Small group interactions?	Home school team meetings?

In the bottom four boxes, we invite your comments to the following prompts:

I was personally renewed by...	My curiousity was piqued about...
I connected with...	I am committed to...

Use the back side of this paper to write other comments.

QUEST: Inquiry Into Improvement

Please help us assess the learning experience for you by completing the following items.

I. Circle the number that best represents your thinking about the extent to which each of the following six goals were accomplished.

5 = Extremely well 3 = Average 1 = Not well accomplished

Goal 1: ***Connect*** with colleagues.	5	4	3	2	1
Goal 2: ***Create*** a learning community.	5	4	3	2	1
Goal 3: ***Connect*** with concepts related to continuous school improvement.	5	4	3	2	1
Goal 4: ***Create*** personal and shared meaning	5	4	3	2	1
Goal 5: ***Commit*** to continue learning with this community.	5	4	3	2	1
Goal 6: ***Commit*** to continue the QUEST back home.	5	4	3	2	1

Appendix B:

Follow-Up Form

Pre-Conference Questionnaire
QUEST Elementary Network
Lexington, Kentucky
February 22 - 24, 1998

1. Did you attend the QUEST event in Nashville? _____

2. If you attended the Nashville QUEST conference/rally, what, if anything, did you learn from it? _____
_____
_____
_____

3. If you attended the Nashville QUEST conference/rally, what, if anything, have you or your QUEST team done as a result of participating? _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4. Do you have access to the Internet? Yes___ No___

If no, skip to question 5.

If yes, have you been a part of the QUEST electronic listserv? Yes___ No___

If yes, in what ways, if at all, has the listserv affected you? _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

If no, would you like to participate on the electronic listserv? (Participation means that you could receive and send messages to other QUEST network members.) Yes___ No___

If yes, please provide your name and E-mail address: _____
_____

5. As you think about the journey of continuous improvement in your school, what do you hope for from this QUEST rally? _____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix C:

Completed Evaluation *Standards* Checklist

Citation Form

The Program Evaluation Standards (1994, Sage) guided the development of this (check one):

____ request for evaluation plan/design/proposal
____ evaluation plan/design/proposal
____ evaluation contract
__X__ evaluation report
____ other: _____

To interpret the information provided on this form, the reader needs to refer to the full text of the standards as they appear in Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, *The Program Evaluation Standards* (1994), Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.

The *Standards* were consulted and used as indicated in the table below (check as appropriate):

Descriptor		The Standard was deemed applicable and to the extent feasible was taken into account.	The Standard was deemed applicable but could not be taken into account.	The Standard was not deemed applicable.	Exception was taken to the Standard.
U1	Stakeholder Identification	X			
U2	Evaluator Credibility	X			
U3	Information Scope and Selection	X			
U4	Values Identification	X			
U5	Report Clarity	X			
U6	Report Timeliness and Dissemination	X			
U7	Evaluation Impact	X			
F1	Practical Procedures	X			
F2	Political Viability			X	
F3	Cost Effectiveness	X			
P1	Service Orientation	X			
P2	Formal Agreements	X			
P3	Rights of Human Subjects	X			
P4	Human Interactions	X			
P5	Complete and Fair Assessment	X			
P6	Disclosure of Findings	X			
P7	Conflict of Interest	X			
P8	Fiscal Responsibility	X			
A1	Program Documentation	X			
A2	Context Analysis	X			
A3	Described Purposes and Procedures	X			
A4	Defensible Information Sources	X			
A5	Valid Information	X			
A6	Reliable Information	X			
A7	Systematic Information	X			
A8	Analysis of Quantitative Information	X			
A9	Analysis of Qualitative Information	X			
A10	Justified Conclusions	X			
A11	Impartial Reporting	X			
A12	Metaevaluation	X			

Name (typed) Caitlin Howley-Rowe Date: 3/13/98

(signature) Caitlin Howley-Rowe

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Relation to Document: Author
(e.g., author of document, evaluation team leader, external auditor, internal auditor)

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